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AUTHOR	Metzker, Bill
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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the rationale for changing school calendars. It describes what some districts are doing and advises school leaders and board members on the issues that typically arise when a calendar is changed. It examines the nationwide push toward a longer school year, driven in part by so-called high-stakes testing and mandated increases in instructional hours. The digest also looks at the district and state levels and how their calendars are being adjusted in response to local imperatives. In Michigan, for example, district superintendents had to incorporate a state-required increase of 108 instructional hours. While some year-round schools offer intercessions during breaks for students who need remedial help, other districts are exploring extra days, after-school programs, and/or summer sessions as ways to extend learning. Researchers and educators recognize that the traditional school calendar does not correlate with children's learning patterns. However, experts agree that it is of little value to add days to the calendar without a concrete plan for using the time to enhance instruction. Viewed this way, the calendar becomes a variable that educators can tailor to the particular needs of their students; modified and extended calendars are rapidly becoming the norm in schools across the country. (Contains 14 references.) (RJM)

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School Calendars

By Bill Metzker

Few issues in a community generate the fractiousness that changes in school calendars can, yet many districts nationwide are scheduling earlier start times for school. The traditional September start date may become a mere memory. In 1988, just over half the nation's schools opened before September 1; in 2000, three-quarters did—a 50 percent increase (Market Data Retrieval, 2001).

A year ago, Rudolph W. Guiliani, then mayor of New York City, proposed Saturday classes, and New York's governor suggested longer school days. In California, Governor Gray Davis has recommended adding thirty instructional days for middle-school students to address academic deficiencies (Wilgoren, January 10, 2001).

A move toward year-round schooling propels some of this change, but socioeconomic conditions and demands for higher school standards play significant roles as well. As of this writing, newly passed federal legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, calls for more testing and accountability than many states presently require. In this high-stakes environment, addressing time in some form—more of it, rearranging how it's scheduled, or making better use of what's already there—has become part of the school-reform agenda.

This Digest discusses the rationale for changing school calendars, describes what some districts are doing, and advises school leaders and board members on the issues that typically arise when a calendar is changed.

Why Change?

As compulsory education evolved in the United States, so did the conventional school calendar of nine months in school followed by a three-month summer vacation, during which many children helped with harvesting crops. But now that it is common for both parents to work outside the home year-round, public opinion increasingly supports a longer school year (Rakoff 1999).

As part of the push to reform schools, states have legislated so-called high-stakes testing and mandated increased instructional hours. To complete state examinations by December's winter break, some school districts are starting classes earlier. Others have added days to accommodate a state-mandated expansion of hours, while others modify the calendar for localized reasons (Keller 2001). Some of these calendars add days, usually as remedial intercessions between breaks. Summer sessions also play an increasing role.

For these and other reasons, more schools across the country are altering their instructional schedules. Some are trying later start times to address adolescents' physiological needs (for more sleep). Several rural districts are adopting four-day weeks. Other schools are experimenting with trimesters. Extended learning schedules for students with academic deficiencies are now available in many districts. And two million children attend year-round schools (Chaika 1999).

What Are States and Districts Doing?

School districts set their instructional calendars in response to a variety of local imperatives. In Michigan, district superintendents have had to adjust to a state-required increase of 108 instructional hours, and at least one district moved its start date to August (Keller). North Carolina school boards must adopt a school calendar of 220 days, of which 180 to 200 must be instructional (Education Commission of the States, 2000). Students at Brooks Global Studies Magnet Elementary in Greensboro, North Carolina, began school on August 1, 2001, and will attend school for 210 days, with breaks interspersed.

In 2002, Pinellas County schools in the Tampa Bay, Florida, area will open August 7 to allow time for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test; the district also hopes the change will help it compete for teachers by offering an early paycheck (Fields 2000). At the Jefferson School District in Kentucky, school officials moved the start date to mid-August so that the school year ends before Memorial Day in late May (personal communication with Robert Rodosky, 2001). Parental choice led to an early start date in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where fewer than 1 percent wished to begin after Labor Day (personal communication with Mary Thurman, 2001).

Most schools in Indiana open around August 15. In the Benton Community School Corporation of that state, the Board of School Trustees mandated that the first semester, when state tests are administered, end prior to the winter break. Since school ends earlier in the spring, students get first crack at summer jobs (personal communication with Glenn Krueger, 2001). Most West Virginia calendars add vacation time around Thanksgiving for the hunting season; New Orleans schools acknowledge Mardi Gras; and Aroostaook County high schools in Maine give a three-week break for the potato harvest (Chaika).

Are Added Sessions Part of the Shift?

While some year-round schools offer intercessions during breaks between instructional periods for students who need remedial help, other districts are exploring extra days, after-school programs, and/or summer sessions as ways to extend learning. Again, the two primary reasons cited for investigating such changes are the need to meet higher educational standards and the trend for both parents or single parents to work full time.

In Massachusetts, the Academic Support Services Program provides districts with state funds to offer extended learning time for students needing help on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test. The Individual Tutoring in Reading Program provides one-on-one help for fourth-graders.

Minnesota's After-School Enrichment Program funds community organizations that provide after-school programs for students needing academic help, particularly those from low-income neighborhoods or those who are involved in the juvenile justice system. California's After-School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Program is similar.

The Illinois Summer Bridges Program is actually a year-long extended-learning program targeting third- and sixth-grade students. In Texas districts with 35 percent of K-8 students from economically disadvantaged families, the Optional Extended Year initiative may extend the day, week, or year by as much as thirty days (Brown 2000).

Researchers and educators have long known that the traditional school calendar doesn't correlate with children's learning patterns. The long summer break is a hardship, and it interferes with retention of material, particularly for younger children and for students whose families cannot afford summer enrichment activities. In 1999, more than half the nation's large urban districts offered summer programs tailored for remedial work (White 1999).

More Time or Structured Time?

Experts agree that it is of little value to add days to the calendar without a concrete plan for using the time to enhance instruction. Viewed this way, the calendar becomes a variable educators can tailor to the particular needs of their own students.

Kentucky, for example, has an extended learning initiative—Extended School Services (ESS)—that requires schools to identify students who are having difficulty. An intervention rather than a remedial program, the initiative works as an extension of the school year, with instruction correlated to state guidelines and school curricula (Brown).

One ostensibly contrarian study of an experimental intercession calendar in Texas suggests a *shorter* school year may be appropriate for students of average and above-average achievement. Added to a traditional calendar of 170 days was a one-week intercession between grading periods for students who were struggling. Overall effects were favorable, and economically disadvantaged students' scores improved on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills tests (Byrd 2001).

The summer break provides another opportunity for instructional innovation. Summer sessions are most effective when they augment the regular school year, commence close to the start of the new term, and are taught by regular classroom teachers who can assess their students prior to the beginning of the regular year and plan accordingly. Well-structured summer programs show positive results for both remedial and accelerated students (Cooper, July 18, 2000).

What Issues Should Districts Consider Before Changing Calendars?

Changing the school calendar can generate controversy, so a measured and deliberate approach is the most effective. A "top-down" method should be avoided, and districts would do well to begin gradually by setting up pilot programs or magnet schools, if possible (Cooper, September 7, 2000).

Local issues notwithstanding, several common challenges recur: (1) Funding for teacher salaries, supplies, and building maintenance; (2) transportation, child-care concerns, parental involvement, and other factors affecting attendance; (3) scheduling facilities; and (4) ensuring students' safety (CAREI 1999).

Administrators who have experience with calendar changes note various concerns: school attendance boundaries, bus routes, and general community life. Echoing the research, they say it's important to involve the entire community—parents, teachers, students, even private schools—in the discussion, and it's helpful if calendars are published three years in advance (personal communications with school district administrators Linda DeClue, Todd Stogner, and Glenn Krueger 2001).

Consideration of teachers' opinions may be particularly crucial. While they may oppose calendar changes initially, they tend to prefer the new schedules over time. Older teachers can innovate in ways they might not be able to otherwise, while younger ones appreciate the flexibility the new approach affords their personal lives (Gándara 2000).

Changing the school calendar used to be an uncommon practice, but today modified and extended calendars are rapidly becoming the norm in schools across the country. In the cacophony of ideas for school reform, calendar innovation is a variable school boards and district executives can uniquely tailor to meet local needs as they seek ways to raise student achievement.

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